

Bear Reality

Bears inspire the human imagination. They are the center of myths, legends, and art. Curiosity, wonder, fear, and respect are a part of stories told and retold over centuries. In Europe, 10,000 year-old cave drawings of bears can still be seen today. In North America, pictographs dating back 3,000 years illustrate the importance of bears to the native people.

Bears were a part of the real world, the spiritual world, and the celestial world. Both Native Americans and ancient Europeans looked to the heavens and named the same constellations after the bear; “Ursa Major” is Latin for “Great Bear.” The seven brightest stars of the Great Bear form the Big Dipper.

History has recorded many attitude changes about bears. The grizzly was characterized in Indian myth and lore as the master forager, plant gatherer, and bestower of the secrets and mysteries of plants, especially those used for healing medicine. However, as Europeans settled North America bears were killed for fear, sport, food, and to protect life and property. Grizzlies were especially threatening to farmers and ranchers trying to protect livestock and livelihood. The black bear was labeled a pest and generally undesirable.

Today, in the lower 48 states, the grizzly population is less than one percent what it was when Lewis and Clark made their trip west 200 years ago. The grizzly’s historic range covered much of North America west of the Mississippi River: from the plains westward to California and from central Mexico north through Canada and Alaska. By 1922, the grizzly bear was gone in California (except for on the state flag). However, black bears are now a valued member of the California/Nevada fauna. Biologists closely monitor and manage bear populations.

Bear Facts

Bears are mammals, in the scientific family *Ursidae*, and the order *Carnivora*. There are eight different species of bears in the world. Bears live in a variety of habitats, from the ice fields of the Arctic, to the forests and plains of North America,

to the subtropical jungles of Asia and South America. There are no bears in Australia, the Antarctic, or Africa. *Ursus americanus* (UR-sus ah-MAIR-ih-kan-uhs), the black bear, is the bear in the Tahoe area.

Black bears vary in color from tan, or brown, to black. Usually they are dark brown with a brown muzzle and sometimes have a small white chest patch. Adult female bears, called **sows**, may weigh between 100-200 pounds. Adult males, called **boars**, are larger and weigh 150-300 pounds. Individual males weighing over 600 pounds have been reported. Baby bears, called **cubs**, are tiny when first born and weigh less than a pound.

Cubs are born around the end of January or the first part of February while the sow is hibernating. Cubs are helpless when they are born. Their eyes are closed, and they are almost naked. They have only a very thin layer of fur on their bodies. Cubs will snuggle close to their mothers’ bellies where they will be warm and find milk to drink. When sow and cubs leave their winter den in April or May, the cubs will weigh 5 to 7 pounds.

Bears do not sleep soundly in the winter; their inactivity has been termed “seasonal lethargy.” For simplicity, the inactivity of bears during the winter is referred to as hibernation. Once a black bear begins hibernating, it can doze for many months with a body temperature of 88 degrees or higher (within 12 degrees of summer body temperature). Bears can slumber because their warm fur and large body mass allow them to better retain body heat. During hibernation, black bears live off their own fat.

Black bears are very good climbers. If they cannot out-run a predator, they can quickly climb a tree to avoid it. Black bears can run in bursts up to 35 mph and can run up and down hills quickly and easily. Black bears are strong swimmers. Bear teeth are adapted for feeding on both plant and animal matter.

Bear Signs

Black bears have five toes on their front and hind feet, each with a well-developed claw. Their tracks are very distinctive; the hind footprint resembles that of a human. The front foot is short and about 4-5 inches wide. The hind foot is long and narrow, measuring about 7 inches. Claw marks may or may not be visible.

Being aware of tracks, droppings, and other bear signs (claw marks on trees, rotten logs ripped apart, and hair on tree bark from rubbing) will allow you to determine the presence of bears. Adult black bears make a variety of sounds. The most commonly heard sounds are woofing and jaw-popping. The young ones whimper or bawl.

Habitat and Feeding

Forest and mountain areas provide habitat for black bears. Trees provide food, escape from predators, and dens for winter. The grasses, sedges, tubers, and various fruits and berries found in meadows are spring and early summer foods. Black bears eat ants and other insects in summer, but prefer nut crops, especially acorns, and manzanita berries in the fall. Bears have a special tool to help them pick berries—their lips. Bears have prehensile (pre-HEN-sil) lips. This means their lips can bend and grasp. Bears can wrap their lips around berries and pull berries off one by one. As omnivores, they will eat whatever seems edible. Sometimes they even catch and consume young deer fawns or eat dead animals they find.

Bears have an amazing sense of smell. They can probably see as well as humans can and they can see in color. They can see very well at night. A black bear's life is a never-ending search for food. In general, they range from 10 to 250 square miles. Most of the time bears are solitary and secluded. However, as more people live and recreate in bear

habitat there are more chances for bears and humans to interact. When a bear roams into a campground or a backyard and finds a virtual buffet, his timid nature disappears.

Compared to food available in the wild, human food and garbage have more calories and may be easier to obtain. These rewards often motivate bears to seek out human food and garbage. Bears easily become dependent on human food and become “habituated” to these food sources. Bears are fast learners and good problem-solvers. Each year, black bears cause hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage to private property. In the majority of these cases, the damage could have been avoided by taking measures to keep bears from becoming habituated to human food sources.

Threats

The black bear's natural enemies include other bears and mountain lions. Other threats are loss of habitat, motor vehicle strikes, illegal killing, and destruction of bears that pose a threat to people, livestock, or property. Humans are responsible for the majority deaths in bear populations.

The California Department of Fish and Game and the Nevada Department of Wildlife do not relocate black bears that cause property damage or threaten public safety. Data shows relocation is ineffective because bears either return to where they had been a problem, die, or become a problem in a new area. Therefore, the only solution for habituated bears is to kill them once they are a public safety risk. People have the responsibility to keep black bears alive by practicing better habits and preventing bears from becoming habituated to human food and garbage.

Information adapted from “The bear facts on black bear biology and ecology” written by Doug Updike, *California Outdoor California*, volume 63 No. 4, July-August 2002